



A Perfectly Poetic Pairing: A Conversation With Joyce Sidman and Her Editor Ann Rider

Terrell A. Young

Brigham Young University, Provo, UT

Barbara A. Ward

Washington State University, Pullman, WA

It has been said that it takes a village to raise a child, and all of the members of that village contribute something to bring that healthy child to adulthood. The same might be true for the publishing industry. While authors, of course, are the ones who write the words that fill the pages of a book, there are many other individuals that make valuable contributions. In the case of poet Joyce Sidman, recipient of the 2013 NCTE Excellence in Poetry for Children Award, one of the individuals who have been most instrumental in her publishing career is her long-time editor Ann Rider.

Despite her claim to “forget so much once a book is finished!” Rider does remember the first encounter between the editor and the unpublished poet. Both women live in Minnesota, and Rider recalls that they met at an informal writer’s gathering after which Sidman began submitting her work to the woman who would become her editor. Somehow, magic happened, and their first book together was *Song of the Water Boatman* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005). “As with all of Joyce’s work, the first thing I noticed was the quality of her writing,” Rider declares.

That’s something she continues to notice. “Joyce chooses her words very carefully and only sends me things that she has worked on already quite a lot,” Rider explains. “Her teaching in the schools helps her with her craft, too. And I think Houghton Mifflin Harcourt [Sidman’s publisher] handles books with care at every stage: editing, copy editing, design, production. Maybe Joyce’s books are the sum of all these parts?”

As for Sidman, her poetry draws inspiration from the places with which she is most familiar. Having been born and grown up in Connecticut and then spent summer vacations in Maine and Pennsylvania, she is convinced that those places “add a layer of resonance



Poet Joyce Sidman (L) and Editor Ann Rider (R)

to our lives and our writing.” Because many of her initial experiences of “joy, sorrow, fear, mystery, and friendship occurred in those places,” she says that “those landscapes hover in the back of my mind, lending me image and metaphor—mysterious pine trees, waves against a rocky shore, meadows full of blueberry bushes and tumbledown stone walls.” Since those childhood experiences of the world are so important, Sidman considers them to be “a deep well that we keep turning to again and again in writing.”

Sidman also remembers her early attempts at writing poetry in grade school, but her freshman year in high school was the most formative for her, largely due to a wonderful poetry-loving English teacher who became her mentor throughout Sidman’s high school years. The award-winning poet has not forgotten the woman’s

willingness to read and find something worth praising in what she calls “unfocused, angst-filled poems.” Their paths crossed again later when they became neighbors and members of the same local writers’ group.

From their first experiences working together, Sidman noticed the deftness with which Rider handled her work and was impressed with the editor’s astute ability to match her books of poetry with the right illustrator. “A book’s editor selects the illustrator and guides the marriage of text to art,” Sidman explains. Although Sidman has had some input on who illustrates her books, ultimately Rider is responsible for “choosing the glorious illustrators who have brought my books to life. In addition, Houghton Mifflin’s design and production team is superb—they consistently produce beautiful books. I feel tremendously lucky.”

For *Song of the Water Boatman*, Rider chose an artist (Beckie Prange) whose woodcuts she’d noticed at a local gallery. Sidman recalls, “When she sent me samples of Beckie’s work, I was stunned: this was exactly the kind of art I’d hoped for—bold, detailed, respectful of the young audience. Not goofy or condescending or artificial in any way. It was a risk—two unknowns, creating a hybrid poetry/science book.” It might have seemed like a risk, but it turned out not to be much of one since Rider is blessed with excellent intuition when it comes to pairing the work of authors with the right illustrators. Not only was Rider correct in her choice for those illustrations, but Sidman claims that she is uncannily almost always right.

From the start, Rider was struck by the poetic quality of Sidman’s writing. “Joyce’s imagery is original and powerful,” Rider says, explaining that when she reads the poet’s work, “I often see it with art right away – and that is a sign to me that I might be the right editor for the book and be able to make the right match with the right illustrator.”

Rider modestly claims that her contributions as Sidman’s editor are small. “As I often tell Joyce, she really doesn’t need an editor – I do very little editing in general,” she says. “What I most like about working with her is just getting to know the person that she is (and that comes through in her writing, of course): wise, generous, perceptive and kind.”

While she might not edit Sidman’s books with a heavy hand, Rider is decisive when it comes to choosing the illustrator whose artwork will grace her volumes. While each publishing house handles those decisions differently, she explains that the editor usually makes the match at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. “I always consult the author in doing so,” she says. “Often enough, images of a certain artist’s work come to me while I’m first reading a manuscript. I try to follow those instincts when I can.”

Clearly, her instincts for authorial and illustrator pairings are accurate since books edited by Rider have

garnered a number of honors: the Caldecott Medal in 1999 for Jacqueline Briggs Martin’s *Snowflake Bentley* (illustrated by Mary Azarian) and in 2009 for Susan Marie Swanson’s *The House in the Night* (illustrated by Beth Krommes); Caldecott Honors in 2010 for Sidman’s *Red Sings from Treetops* (illustrated by Pamela Zagarenski) and in 2006 for Sidman’s *Song of the Water Boatman: And Other Pond Poems* (illustrated by Beckie Prange); in 2013 for Mary Logue’s *Sleep Like a Tiger* (illustrated by Pamela Zagarenski); and the Newbery Honor in 2011 for Sidman’s *Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night* (illustrated by Rick Allen). Of course, winning a Newbery or Caldecott “feels like a huge honor,” she says. “To have such a book-smart group select, discuss, critique and finally choose a book of ours is beyond flattering.”

Although many writers have experienced editing that is completed face to face, that isn’t the case with Rider. In fact, she is often not even in the same town or state as her authors and illustrators. “I work out of my home in northern Minnesota so face-to-face interactions have to occur at conventions. I always enjoy them, and they add a lot to books, but the heart of the communication is by mail, either snail mail or e-mail,” she explains. “Because Joyce’s books often have to do with science and observation, I very much rely on her input on the sketches. In general, I try to have author’s comments on art flow through me, but not always: Joyce and Beth Krommes, for example, sometimes carry on conversations in the formative stages of a book.”

Although Rider claims to have had little influence on Sidman’s work, she does admit that selecting the illustrators for her books is something she takes quite seriously. “If, for some reason, I could no longer work on Joyce’s books, I would want the next editor to be very careful about finding the right illustrator,” she says. Just as teachers and librarians know that making the right match between books and readers may be decisive in encouraging readers, Rider is convinced that the right illustrations can set off the text perfectly, possibly even elevating it or adding a layer of interpretation.

Sidman, who agrees about the importance of illustrations and book covers, says she sometimes asks schoolchildren to figure out what interests her by examining all the covers of her books. “They always nail it!” she says. “The natural world, animals, color, the senses, dogs... all these things inspire me. But I think underneath it is a quest to discover joy and beauty—even if it means wading through darkness and fear—and then write about it as exactly as I can. I’d love to be a poet that changes the way people see the world, as poet Mary Oliver did for me.” Fully aware of the poets who came before her, she pays tribute to those who continue to inspire her, including Ted Kooser, Karla Kuskin, Naomi Shihab Nye, Alice Schertle, and of course, Valerie Worth, yes, and “countless more, old

and new,” she says.

Rider has her role as an editor down pat, and she says the process doesn't particularly change from one author to the next. As she explains, “My process doesn't vary that much from book to book. First, I find a text that makes me see images and that makes me see the world a little differently. Then I float illustrator ideas by the author and together, we make the right match. Once that artist has sent in sketches, I share them with the author. Any suggestions we make to the artist are presented as suggestions, never commands. That is how I try to edit, too. In general, I like to leave room for the happy surprises, those moments of serendipity that come about when creative people feel they have the freedom to follow their instincts. In the end, the author and illustrator know best.”

Because Rider recognizes the need that creative spirits have to try out new ideas, she tries not to impose her own ideas on them. “I try to create a climate of freedom for them,” she says. “I try to be a good reader for them--letting them know the precise meaning I take from what they have sent me.” Perhaps most importantly and rarely of all, she tries to “not impose my own ideas on them.”

Rider has been an editor for about 26 years. Her official title at HMH is executive editor, and before joining them, she worked at Little, Brown, Knopf, and *The Horn Book Magazine*, a job she began shortly after college and several publishing internships. She regards the best part of the job as getting “to work with brilliant, creative people and try to create books that last and mean something to children. The worst part is failing – seeing books not make it -- something editors witness all the time,” she says with a note of regret.

In addition to working with Sidman, Rider also shepherds several other authors and illustrators and constantly sifts through mounds of manuscripts. “These days I'm getting several manuscripts a day, from agents alone,” she says. “Our in-house staff handles our unsolicited submissions, so I can't begin to put a number on them.” As she reads and considers possible book projects, Rider claims that she looks “for manuscripts I can't resist.” She searches for books that will appeal to readers, of course, but in the long run, Rider says she wants “to create books that last and that mean something to children. That is the hardest goal I can think of!”

Although she has a better track record than most at identifying books that will sell, Rider says she can never be sure if a manuscript is a winner. “I never know. I just use my best guess – and pursue something if I find it difficult to resist (often for reasons I can't quite put my finger on.) I read anything written by someone I've published and I try to screen much of what agents send me, but simply can't read them all. In-house readers help me do some screening. How many end up being

published? On average, I acquire about one book a month or at least I try to.”

While many readers might expect that the poet and the editor lead glamorous lives, nothing could be further from the truth, according to Rider. While Sidman enjoys wandering around outside and then playing with her poetic ideas, Rider says that for her, “A good day is one spent just reading and editing, both things I love to do. Sadly, too much of my time these days is spent responding to e-mail (hours and hours each day). Glamorous? Oh it is fun to get dressed at conferences and entertain authors, teachers, and librarians, but in general, I am holed up in my office wearing jeans and sneakers.”

While many readers may envision editors holding forth at a conference table, extolling the merits of a book, Rider claims that since editing is a solitary profession, “it lends itself especially well to telecommuting. I can't attend many meetings, but that isn't the heart of what I do anyway. More and more, technology has made it easy to work out of the office.” As a result, she wonders why telecommuting hasn't become more prevalent in this country.

Despite the joys her job brings her, Rider longs for more time for editing and reading. “We all have way too much e-mail to answer,” she says sheepishly. Since Editorial also is responsible for generating selling copy (on book flaps, on ARC copies), and negotiating contracts, Rider spends “a fair amount of time reviewing and rejecting submissions that aren't right for us – and reaching out to agents/writer's conferences to find manuscripts that are right for us. A big part of the job is acquisitions, finding enough good projects to publish.”

As she reflects on her long and successful career, Rider does identify some changes in the publishing industry. “Why does it seem as if editors used to have more time? Time to read and edit and talk to authors?” she asks. “I think I'll blame e-mail again. It is a curse!”

The two women whose careers are so intertwined occasionally contemplate what their lives might have been like if they had taken different career paths. Sidman knows she might have become a full-time teacher, but it's “so much a part of me. If I hadn't been able to publish, I'd be working out my need to write and be creative in others ways.” Had she not become an editor, Rider's other choices seem closely related to her current profession in many ways. She ponders possibly being a Landscape architect or a children's librarian? “I love children's books,” she says, “but I also love the creative process.”

Because Sidman visits many schools and conducts poetry workshops throughout the year, she is able to get honest feedback on her work, which is valuable as she continues to write. Like all readers and writers, she has her own personal favorites among her poems. She often enjoys reading aloud “Night Spider's Advice”

from *Dark Emperor* and dedicating it to teachers and parents in the audience. For Sidman, the poem honors “those who work with children, who daily ‘remake’ the world for them.” Sidman remains respectful of those adults who are filled with “that energy and selflessness, that willingness to learn.” After all, in Sidman’s eyes, teaching involves constant reflection and “the daily process of taking stock: *Okay, this worked, this didn’t—what have I learned? What should I do tomorrow?*” Although she speaks of teachers and parents here, she might also be describing what poets do as well.

Both women have good advice for budding poets or editors, much of it related to reading. Sidman strongly urges that aspiring poets read poetry and experiment with different poetic forms. She suggests that youngsters—and older would-be poets as well “write for yourself. Write for the child you were and still are. If you delight yourself, you will delight others.” Budding poets should find colleagues they trust, and then listen to their critical comments. Perhaps most difficult of all, though, is her suggesting that beginning poets “sort through what you sense is true in their criticism, and what is just a different way of seeing the world. Be true to what you know in your heart.”

Rider’s own advice for youngsters interested in following in her editorial footsteps seems taken from the pages of her own life. “Read!” she declares. “Read recently-published books to help you decide what sort of publishing you like best, maybe even what house might best suit you. And read the classics to help you understand their lasting power with children. Try a few internships and see how they feel.”

Whether a poet or an editor, today’s young writers can certainly learn from the stories of this happy (and successful) creative partnership. It is virtually impossible to not think of editor Ann Rider when considering the career of poet Joyce Sidman—or to some extent, vice versa.

Children’s Books Cited

- Logue, M. (2012). *Sleep like a tiger*, illustrated by P. Zagarenski. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Martin, J.B. (1998). *Snowflake Bentley*, illustrated by M. Azarian. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sidman, J. (2005). *Song of the water boatman and other pond poems*, illustrated by B. Prange. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sidman, J. (2006). *Butterfly eyes and other secrets of the meadow*, illustrated by Beth Krommes. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sidman, J. (2007). *This is just to say: Poems for apology and forgiveness*, illustrated by P. Zagarenski. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sidman, J. (2006). *Meow ruff*, illustrated by Michelle Berg. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sidman, J. (2009). *Red sings from rooftops: A year in colors*, illustrated by P. Zagarenski. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sidman, J. (2010). *Dark emperor and other poems of the night*, illustrated by R. Allen. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin .
- Sidman, J. (2010). *Ubiquitous: Celebrating nature’s survivors*, illustrated by B. Prange. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sidman, J. (2011). *Swirl by swirl: Spirals in nature*, illustrated by B. Krommes. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Sidman, J. (2013). *What the heart knows: Chants, charms, and blessings*, illustrated by P. Zagarenski. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Sidman, J. (2014). *Winter bees and other poems of the cold*, illustrated by R. Allen. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Swanson, S.M. (2014). *The house in the night*, illustrated by B. Krommes. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.